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BOOKS AND THE BOOK WORLD

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SECTION
FIVE

Ma Pettengill Performs

Free Fantasia on Themes by Harry Leon Wilson, With
Special Reference to His Latest and Rather Misleading Lady

SOMETHING less than twenty years ago there emerged from the editorial caverns of a comic weekly with a high grade barbershop circulation a novelist of the then rather non-committal name of Wilson, whose novel proceeded to spread itself over the *Bookman's* box scores on Best Sellers, at that time the fever chart of the Divine Afflatus in America.

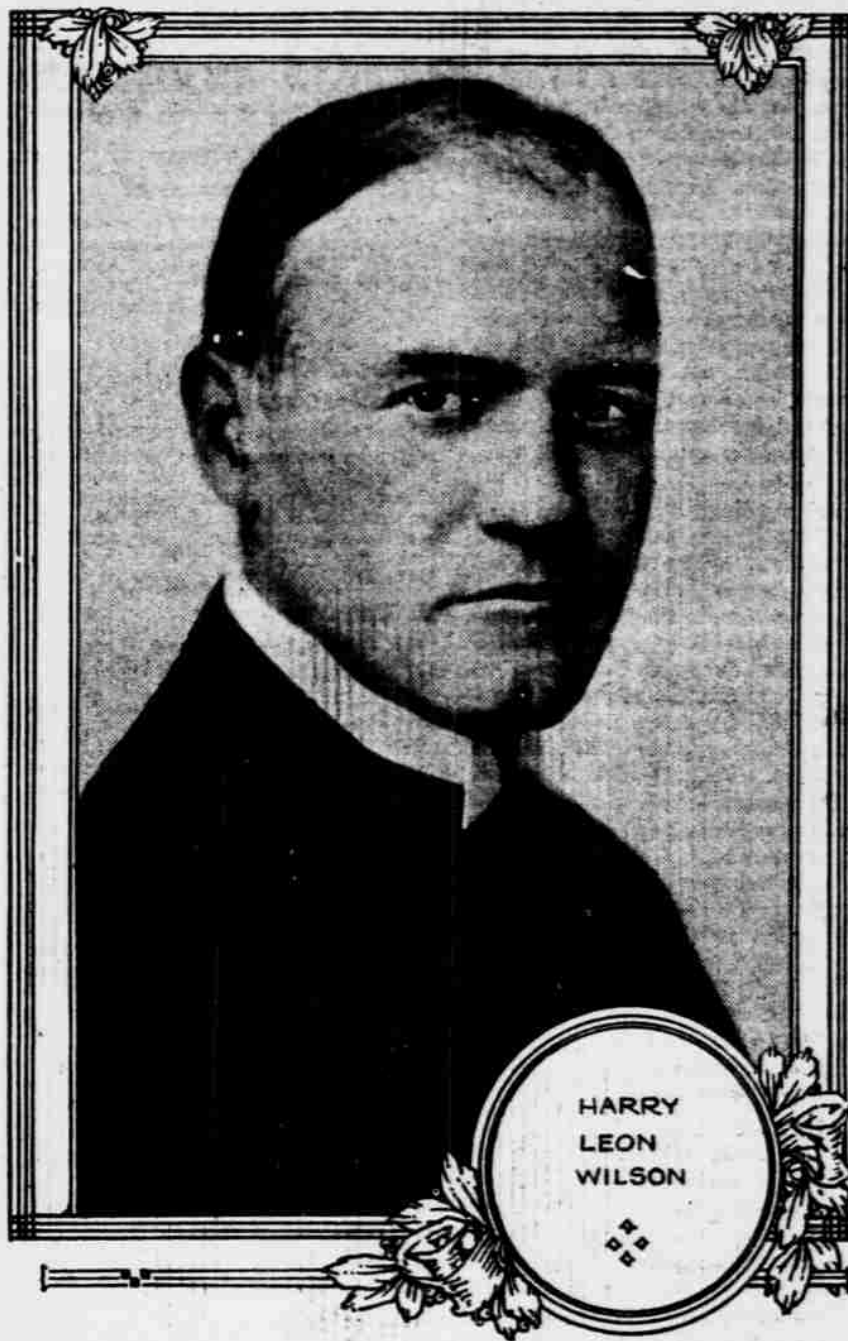
The Spenders told a love story, as all first successful novels do, except a few which don't; but the love story had exculpatory qualities of real love, as humanly experienced by two vigorous and independently interesting young persons. And it did more than that. It contained: quite a picture of high life in New York, from high life in New York's own point of view (the ruthless freebooter of Wall Street was Rulon Shepler, and the adventurous lady was Mrs. Drelmar); a sketch of a young English nobleman on his uppers who was something more than the Yankee humorist's stock be monocled dummy; and, especially, a grand old Rocky Mountain prospector who had struck it rich. It appeared that the Wilson party knew the West and knew his way around the East.

Wherefore some of us waited approvingly to see what else he would write.

He wrote, or perhaps had written, *The Boss of Little Arcady*. (*The Boss* seems strangely forgotten now. Once in a while you run across a choice spirit who remembers it.) Then he went in cahoots with one Tarkington, and they ground out some lucrative plays. Seven years ago Mr. Wilson resumed with a serial called *His Majesty Bunker Bean*.

This story had its vogue, including a bad and disastrous dramatization, and then took its place among the good stories of Yesteryear. It won't remain there. Along in the next century some earnest critic will dig it up—wait and see—and lecture on it as the American Novel of its time. We steal a march and a thunder on that critic. If we don't quite envisage the full area of his claim we think *Bunker Bean* at least the novel, down to date, about New York. There is more of New York New York in it than there is in an East Sixty-Umphth street block of Houses of Mirth and such. Also, it succeeds in being everything it tries to be, and the trying is done lightly, playfully, with total lack of pretentiousness. In other words, *Bunker Bean* for what it is—and it is a good deal more than many of us realized, though the author himself may have been expressing his opinion when he quietly dedicated *Bunker Bean* to H. G. Wells—does not fall very far short of being perfect. A good-sized assertion which we are prepared to defend at any time.

It was followed by *Ruggles of Red Gap*, a novel of distinctive and creditable if somewhat uneven humor, both blessed and handicapped with an



Olympian beginning. That beginning, if any one missed it, is the making drunk of, and the raising of hob with, an intensely real English gentleman's man, in Paris, by a crew of intensely real poker-faced American Northwesterners—and the narrator is the gentleman's man! Mark Twain should have lived to read it. As a piece of that distinctively American litterychoor so many Litt. D.'s are always sniffing for, it is possibly even better than *Bunker Bean*. It belongs beside *The Game and the Nation* out of *The Virginian*; our preference rather inclines toward it, of the two. The worst thing about the rest of *Ruggles* is having to come after it.

Then *The Mixer of Red Gap* emerged and started in to tell short stories. She told two or three that are capital, and one of these three, *Pete's Bother-in-Law*, is in our judgment another classic of the wholesome, homely humor of these States—as sound a brand of humor as we know. But Mrs. Lysander John Pettengill kept on. She told a bookful, and she still kept on. Her second bookful is out. It bears her name.

Now if there had been no Bunker Bean, if there had been no Ruggles and Cousin Egbert and the rest of 'em in Paris, if the squaw of Pete the travelled Modoc had not been "some chicken, b'lieve me," and his message to the Great White Father had been other than it was, and that convenient Bother-in-Law of his had not threatened to make something happen to Pete's smart lawyer in the night, The Woman might pursue what she would call her nefarious career, rolling her own and yarning about her neighbors as she smoked, as far as ever she liked, for all of us. We don't mean to say that these stories of her second batch are bad, as short stories go, year in and year out. They will give pleasure, and doubtless have, to hundreds of thousands of readers.

But we are not now holding forth from that point of view. We're holding forth from the pinnacle of the epicure, and while epicures on pinnacles may not run into hundreds of thousands there are more of them around than writing and publishing gamemasters may imagine. Three or four weeks ago we had occasion to descant

upon new tales by Leonard Merrick, of which we could find only favorable things to say; so, having a strong propensity to manhandle some public character once a week, we lugged the more recent Ma Pettengill into that galley and manhandled her. And readers—human readers, most remarkably like you—took pains to thank us for it. One of 'em mailed thanks all the way from Columbia, S. C. Like ourselves, they were waiting for something comparable with Bean or Ruggles to read, waiting loyally but growing weary.

There never has been to our knowledge an American "character" narrator, or for that matter an American "character" character who wasn't a narrator, who held up in short story series forever. And the bigger they are at the outset the harder they fall. Jack Hamlin grew tame in the end. Wallingford, once quite a specimen, may be rinky-dinking yet—we don't know and we don't care. Judge Priest rapidly grew thin. Emma McChesney lost her punch. Potask & Perlmutter's interest exactions became usurious. Penrod, the immortal, condescended to a lingering moribundity. William Sylvester Baxter, the somewhat less immortal, didn't. But William knew where to stop.

Ma Pettengill is not hopeless. *Ma* is only a trifle perfunctory and topical and standardized. She seems to perform to order. Finding a dearth of material in Red Gap, she has to import her themes, and imports what she thinks the public wants—the movie male candy-box lead; the urban female patrioteer; the Greenwich village emancipate, smocked and sandalled. None of those three stories is worth a flick of her quirt, though the patrioteer is hit off pretty sharply. Much better, but still unworthy of the Arrowhead Ranch brand, are *The Animal Kingdom*—which breaks into the long preempted range of the cowpuncher liar—and *Can Happen* which without becoming too malodorous gets out of a skunk what amusement there is in one. *Vendetta* is all right enough, without setting the creek on fire. The rest are so-so.

Doubtless Mr. Harry Leon Wilson and Mrs. Lysander John Pettengill can go right along conversing to any extent, brightening the corner when they are and drawing a good income from it. There's nothing criminal about it. A large public will be grateful. But if there are any more Old Peter Bineses, or Beans, or Cousin Egberts, or Ruggleses, up the Wilsonian sleeve, and unless there are any more Petes and the like (which latter we doubt) we take leave to wish that one of our favorite living American authors would get Mrs. Pettengill off his hands and give them a chance to come down.

MA PETTENGILL. BY HARRY LEON WILSON. Doubleday, Page & Co. \$1.50.